

**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)****REPORT****EXPERT GROUP MEETING****REVIEW OF DRAFT REGIONAL ANALYSIS REPORT ON:****THE SITUATION OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING
IN SELECTED ARAB COUNTRIES
BEIRUT, 6-7 APRIL 2016****Summary**

The Expert Group Meeting was designed to engage representatives from target Governments and youth NGOs (in Jordan, Kuwait and Tunisia), the American University of Beirut (commissioned by ESCWA to draft the report), experts and related UN agencies in an interactive discussion over the findings and recommendations of a report entitled “*The Situation of Youth Participation in Decision-Making in Selected Arab Countries*” that falls under an inter-regional Development Account Project titled “*Strengthening the capacity of governments in the ESCAP, ECA, and ESCWA regions to respond to the needs of youth in formulating inclusive and sustainable development policies*”. The relevance and timeliness of this Report lies in its contribution to understanding the situation of youth in the Arab region, highlighting shortfalls in youth participation in decision-making, and drawing lessons about governments’ engagement with youth and the development of inclusive and effective youth-oriented policies and engagement channels.

The meeting aimed at collecting experts’ feedback and comments on the draft version of the regional analysis report, in addition to receiving suggestions for improvements, and presenting informed opinion on priority issues and emerging trends related to youth participation and empowerment in the Arab region. Discussions were held over two days. The first day focused on showcasing the principal findings of the draft regional report, the research challenges encountered and opportunities presented, along with their perceptions, aspirations and vision for youth empowerment and effective participation in two Arab countries, namely Jordan and Tunisia. The second day presented a brief analysis of focused group discussions on youth participation in decision-making in two Arab countries¹ targeted in the report, namely, Jordan and Tunisia, and explored ESCWA’s initiative in developing capacity-building manual for enhancing youth participation in decision making processes in the Arab region.

Throughout the discussions, several key messages emerged relating to these issues.

¹ The Focus Group Discussions in Kuwait had not yet taken place at the time of the EGM but had been organized for late April.

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CONTENTS

	<i>Paragraphs</i>	<i>Page</i>
Introduction	1-3	3
I. KEY MESSAGES	4-5	3
II. DISCUSSION TOPICS.....	6-18	5
A. THE Situation of Arab Youth in the Region : Key Development Challenges and Opportunities	6-9	5
B. Formal and Informal Channels of Youth Participation in the Arab region	10-11	5
C. Perceptions of Youth vis-à-vis Key National Issues in Selected Countries in the Arab REGION	12-14	6
D. Analysis of Youth Participation in Decision Making in Selected Countries in the Arab region	15-16	6
E. The Development of Capacity Building Manual for Enhancing the Participation of Youth in Decision Making Processes in the Arab region....	17-18	7
 III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK.....	 19-23	8
A. Venue and date.....	19	8
B. Opening	20-23	8
 IV. LIST OF PARTICIPANTS	 9	

INTRODUCTION

1. The Participation and Social Justice and the Population and Social Development Sections of the Social Division in Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) convened on 6 and 7 April 2017 an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) to review and validate the first draft of the regional analysis report entitled "*The Situation of Youth Participation in Decision-Making in Selected Arab Countries*". The Expert Group Meeting was designed to engage representatives from target Governments and youth NGOs (in Jordan, Kuwait and Tunisia), the American University of Beirut (commissioned by ESCWA to draft the report), experts and related UN agencies in an interactive discussion over the findings and recommendations of a report entitled "*The Situation of Youth Participation in Decision-Making in Selected Arab Countries*" that falls under an inter-regional Development Account Project titled "*Strengthening the capacity of governments in the ESCAP, ECA, and ESCWA regions to respond to the needs of youth in formulating inclusive and sustainable development policies*".

2. This report builds on long-term research and ongoing normative work on youth empowerment programming initiatives undertaken by ESCWA, and aims at increasing understanding of the situation of youth participation in the Arab region and informing the Governments on sustainable means to engage with youth in policy-making, and to develop inclusive and effective youth-oriented policies. The analysis report delves into the normative concept and definition of youth participation, and provides an overview of the situation of youth in the Arab region, including the multi-dimensional challenges they face. It examines the extent to which Arab governments engage with youth in policy-making processes, including programs targeting youth wellbeing and development, and highlights the existing formal and informal channels of youth participation across the region. The report also presents primary data on the perceptions of youth and other stakeholders in two Arab countries, namely Jordan and Tunisia, regarding the impact of youth participation in terms of relevance, ownership and quality, as well as the effectiveness of the policies responding to youth needs, and the empowerment of youth. The analysis also draws a number of conclusions and recommendations to enhance youth participation channels across the Arab region in general and in the target countries in particular, and distils a number of best practices, lessons learned, and suggestions for future targeted programming towards a more effective and genuine and sustainable youth participation.

3. The relevance of this report lies in its contribution to highlighting emerging trends, youth perceptions and existing multifaceted challenges to youth participation in decision-making in the Arab region. Such a report also helped advocate for further engaging with youth and for an institutionalization of their participation in development policy processes in the region.

I. KEY MESSAGES

4. During the discussions, participants identified a number of key messages to validate and improve the regional analysis report:

- (a) The draft analysis report should include a functional definition of "Participation", including traditional and non-traditional forms of participation
- (b) Some figures and statistics in the analysis report, notably about female and male Arab youth, need to be updated and need to be supported with further statistics and figures from the three target countries, namely Tunisia, Jordan and Kuwait in order to reflect the actual situation of youth participation and youth challenges at the national level and provide evidence-based information and valid data that help inform policies.
- (c) Participants acknowledged the UN definition of youth (15-24 years), but highly recommended that the report endorses national definitions of youth.
- (d) In view of the poor documentation on youth participation in the Arab region, there was strong consensus that the case studies are extremely valuable in creating knowledge and therefore should be an integral part of the Report and discouraged against featuring them separately in an annex. This will make the

report credible in filling research gaps and it shall include the findings and consequent analysis, conclusion and recommendations of the draft report.

5. Participants also provided a number of key messages about overall youth participation:

(a) Schools and the family emerged as disempowering institutions for the youth. Therefore, future interventions targeting youth participation in decision-making should be holistic in nature, by which they target the youth as well as the family, schools or educational institutions, the communities, and other stakeholders.

(b) Many schools and educational institutions lack extra-curricular activities needed to sharpen leadership skills among youth. Any educational reform should target empowering the Youth in all aspects. Civic education should be an integral part of the school curriculum in schools in the region so as to introduce young students to the concept of participation and offer them hands-on experiences as part of their development.

(c) In an effort to maintain status-quo, some governments and other stakeholders are fearful of change. However, governments are strongly encouraged to build sustainable dialogue channels with youth to learn more about their concerns and aspirations. They should be more respectful of youth needs, and should institute proper means for their active engagement in policy-making and national planning.

(d) Capacity building material for enhancing the participation of youth in decision-making processes should take into account previous experiences in this field, and link the capacity-building trainings to institutional as well as individual youth needs. Such material should also adopt a scientific approach in targeting different age groups of youth.

(e) Due to scarcity in documentation, data about youth projects is lacking. This needs to be addressed in future research for better evidence –based policy making and programming.

(f) Areas that need further research include the role of youth in political parties, municipalities and civil society institutions.

(g) There is lack of awareness about the culture of participation and volunteerism which should be further promoted in the Arab region. Furthermore, there needs to be more role models that Arab youth can look up to.

(h) There is a perceived lack of trust between politicians and the Youth who often question whether they are genuinely allowed to participate politically and be active in that field.

(i) There needs to be better created “spaces” for dialogue, for instance through youth forums, between the Youth and key stakeholders, notably decision-makers.

(k) There is a complete disconnect between the Youth and other stakeholders in interpreting the level of youth participation. While the Youth perceive their participation as limited; Governments seem to have an opposite view. Therefore, there is a need to bridge that gap through enhancing trust building and sharing of information to be able to sustain collaborative environment.

(l) Youth participation seems to be enhanced in the field of entrepreneurship and the launching of start-ups. Governments should undertake measures to promote this form of youth participation by for example introducing incentives and tax reductions.

II. DISCUSSION TOPICS

6. The EGM was comprised of five interdependent panel discussions, and concluded with a wrap-up session that presented a number of conclusions and recommendations. During the two day meeting, participants deliberated on a range of topics in five panel discussions:

A. PANEL I: THE SITUATION OF ARAB YOUTH IN THE REGION: KEY DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

7. Mr. Jad Chaaban, Associate Professor of Economics at the American University of Beirut (AUB), and lead author of the Arab Human Development Reports 2016, presented main findings of the AHDR report, and addressed four major youth-related questions: “*What’s going wrong in the Arab region?*”, “*How are Arab youth doing?*”, “*Whose fault is it?*”, and “*Can the youth do anything about it?*”.

8. Mr. Chaaban stated that more Arab countries are inflicted by conflict and/or political violence than a decade ago, and Arab countries exhibit low economic development and increasingly high cost of living. He added that while the number of economic opportunities is increasing, the number of Arab youth is also increasing, and clarified that one of the reasons of youth unemployment is the absence of school to work transition. He also stressed that the main problem of low youth participation in the Arab region is due to the prevalence of social inequality, and proposes that the first step to address this problem is by promoting the role of the public sector while acknowledging the failure of neoliberal policies in empowering the youth and generating employment. He also emphasized that Arab youth are more educated and more connected to social media, which make them well equipped to be agents of change.

9. The discussion revolved around youth participation and the challenges they face in the Arab world amidst protracted conflicts and poor governance. Experts noted that the Arab region is in a state of constant change and youth participation should be given a greater importance and attention. They also highlighted the necessity to address youth mental health with respect to participation, and identified centralization of political power with policy-makers, difficulty of accessing knowledge, and inability to reach policy makers as monumental challenges to effective and genuine youth participation. Finally, participants emphasized the lack of trust between youth and the older generation, especially policy makers, and highlighted the negative effects of the feeling of distrust and lack of intergenerational communication on policies and practice.

B. PANEL II: FORMAL AND INFORMAL CHANNELS OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN THE ARAB REGION

10. Ms. Nadia Nameh and Ms. Thurayya Zreik, research members of the technical team at AUB that prepared the above-mentioned regional analysis, presented main findings of the draft report and discussed the formal and informal channels of youth participation in the Arab region. They elaborated on examples of formal channels, including youth policy formulation in 10 Arab countries, diverse official governmental representation, national youth representation in 14 countries, and varied voting and candidacy age. However they also pointed out that, with regards to the informal channels, youth are more engaged in civic than in political activities, and their presence and participation are more pronounced in capacity-building and conferences targeting youth, all of which make them passive rather than active partners of development. They also noted- with concern- the lack of documentation on youth participation practices in the region and the dependency of the sustainability of youth empowering projects on funding.

11. The discussion focused on complementing the data presented in the draft report with available national data and reports, and updating some of data and statistics used in the analysis. Participants clarified that some of the information presented is outdated, such as the proportion of youth in Arab countries, and asserted the need to identify the reference for statistics included in the draft report, such as youth unemployment rates. They also expressed the need for diversifying the sources of statistics and not solely depending on UN reports. The discussion went further by accentuating the significance of thinking outside the box through engaging youth perspectives in the draft report and coming up with new definitions for youth economic and political participation. Participants indicated that the draft report question that addresses the effect of youth participation

in decision-making on policies in the Arab region, is very difficult to answer using the methodology adopted in the draft report. In addition, experts recommended including a specific aspect of youth participation in each country because the case studies do not necessarily represent the situation of all youth in the Arab region. Participants also explained that researching information online in the Arab region does not yield accurate data as when undertaking focus group discussions and one-to-one interviews with focal points which require further resources and time.

C. PANEL III: PERCEPTIONS OF YOUTH VIS-À-VIS KEY NATIONAL ISSUES IN SELECTED COUNTRIES IN THE ARAB REGION

12. Ms. Nihaya Al Sheyab, Vice Dean of the Faculty of Nursing at the Jordan University for Science and Technology, presented the main findings of the qualitative analysis undertaken in Jordan, which included eight focus group discussions with school and university students as well as four interviews with youth stakeholders in the city of Irbid in Jordan. She demonstrated that the definition of youth participation differed among different groups of participants by gender, socioeconomic status, and educational level. One interesting finding, Ms. Al Sheyab elucidated, is the contradiction in the perceptions of the extent of youth participation between the youth themselves who believe it is limited in scope and effect on the one hand, and the stakeholders who claimed that it is a positive participation on the other hand. Ms. Al Sheyab suggested, in response to this contradiction, to improve and enhance effective communication between the government and youth as a means to promote their active participation.

13. Ms. Rym Haloues, a consultant in youth affairs in Tunisia, also presented the main findings from the qualitative analysis undertaken in Tunisia, which was comprised of seven focus group discussions with school and university students, supported by six interviews with youth stakeholders in different regions of Tunisia. She showcased the definition of participation according to Tunisian youth who believed that youth are involved in the implementation of projects and not in the actual planning and designing processes of policies. She also illustrated the perceptions of stakeholders who related the low youth participation to the unstable economic and political situation in Tunisia. Ms. Haloues concluded with two success stories of youth participation in Tunisia.

14. The discussion that followed the presentation centered on the methodology adopted in the case studies considered in the report, and provided recommendations for consideration in future similar studies. These consist of incorporating and covering more regions in future national case studies, taking into account diverse perceptions and differing attitudes that exist across regions; and questioning the presence of a psycho-indicator in the focus group discussions guide, since youth might answer questions based on their parents' perceptions and not their own. Participants also pointed out that the behavior of today's youth in Tunisia is the result of ten years of oppression, as well as to the difficult political transition that Tunisia is witnessing, amidst the proliferation of terrorist acts and a steep economic recession. Experts also questioned whether the FGD participants accounted for youth who were neither in employment, nor in education or training (NEET), and recommended to shift from a patriarchal approach to an inclusive approach to youth participation in decision-making.

D. PANEL IV: ANALYSIS OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING IN SELECTED COUNTRIES IN THE ARAB REGION

15. Ms. Mayada Kanj, instructor in the Department of Health Promotion and Community health at the American University of Beirut, presented the findings of the regional analysis of the draft analysis report. Ms. Kanj pinpointed that the concept of "youth participation in decision making" is undermined at the level of homes and schools. On the one hand, families do not support youth engagement due to lack of trust, perceptions that youth are immature, and gender-related issues. On the other hand, teachers at schools have negative attitudes towards youth participation and school curricula do not encourage youth engagement. She added that youth are increasingly perceived as a burden rather than an asset to families and communities. She listed the

determinants of youth participation as follows: personal, interpersonal, and community factors as well as existing environment and culture. She also stressed that youth interventions must address, in a scientific way, the root causes and structural challenges hindering youth participation in decision making. Ms. Kanj concluded that the analysis of the draft report will increase understanding among policy makers of youth-related issues, and strengthen their capacities to formulate cross-sectoral policies that contribute to increased youth participation.

16. The experts were engaged in a discussion towards improving the analysis of the draft report. They identified some obstacles to youth participation in decision making, namely: the lack of role models for youth, which could be a major incentive for youth participation; the misunderstanding occurring around the concept of participation and its attribution to youth participation in popular protests and demonstrations only; the conflict existing between the agendas of donor countries and the legislations and laws of recipient countries; in addition to the usage of the western definition of participation that does not reflect the specific challenges of youth in the Arab region. It was suggested in this realm that the family could play a role model, and that the concept of participation could be normalized among youth when they observe their parents practicing their full participation in policy-making and practice. However, participants referred to several youth initiatives taking place in the Arab region despite the lack of documentation. The experts identified the need for targeting each age group of youth differently given their diverse needs and aspirations, and called for the consideration and adoption of a common definition of participation that takes into account the different forms, types and levels of participation of youth including a definition that reflects the views of youth themselves.

E. PANEL V: THE DEVELOPMENT OF CAPACITY BUILDING MATERIAL FOR ENHANCING THE PARTICIPATION OF ARAB YOUTH IN DECISION MAKING PROCESSES

17. Mr. Jean Dib Hajj, a trainer and capacity-building program designer and the director of “Knowledge for Development” company, presented ESCWA’s initiative to develop a capacity-building manual on youth participation in decision-making. This manual aims to contribute to knowledge and experience-sharing, and to enhancing youth skills for genuine and active participation in public policies and decision-making processes in the Arab region, such as leadership, communication, advocacy, policy dialogue, and consensus-building skills. The manual will be tested in each of the three target countries by conducting a three-day national workshop attended by youth organizations and government officials. Mr. Hajj, introduced the modern trends and methodologies for capacity building, and the most commonly used techniques for capacity building. He, then, stated the conditions for successful capacity building of organizations, including the commitment and support of policy makers, the availability of financial and human resources, and the consideration of organizational culture. He finally addressed some pivotal questions to the experts in an attempt to obtain their insights on improving the capacity building material, such as *“What change should the capacity building material target?”*.

18. The discussion revolved around providing some recommendations for Mr. Hajj for developing an effective capacity building manual for youth participation in decision making processes in the Arab region. Suggestions included reviewing previously developed material on this subject, such as the UNDP’s generic capacity development toolkit, in addition to enriching the guide with audio-visuals. Experts emphasized the importance of identifying and emphasizing the common interest between youth and policy makers to encourage youth participation and create an environment of trust among them. They further noted the lack of sustainability in governments’ capacity building material which tends to adopt a teacher-centered rather than an interactive student-centered approach; thus recommending for this capacity building manual to be sustainable and applicable in all Arab countries while taking into account country specificities. Finally, experts suggested that the capacity building manual should be specific; for instance focusing on promoting communication and finding incentives to boost participation.

III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

A. VENUE AND DATE

19. The review of the draft Regional Report on: “*The Situation of Youth participation in decision-making in selected Arab countries*”, took place at ESCWA in Beirut on 6 and 7 April 2017.

B. OPENING

20. Ms. Karima El Korri, Chief of Population and Social Development Section at the Social Development Division, delivered the opening remarks, which stated that participation is a key factor for empowering youth in Arab countries. She also introduced this meeting as falling within the framework of an inter-regional Development Account project that aims at enriching knowledge about the various means of participation available to young people in Arab countries, and seeks to address the daunting challenges facing this major demographic segment and preventing their voices from reaching the platforms in which policies are developed and decisions are made. As such, Ms. El-Korri raised timely questions, namely: “How does Arab youth participate in decision-making, especially in matters directly related to their rights and opportunities for development?”; “To what extent do young people's social, economic and political participation contributes to improving the quality of development policies and enhancing their impact on their reality and future?”; and “What are the laws, institutions, practices, and gaps that must be filled to create an enabling environment for young people to be an effective decision-making partner?”. Ms. El-Korri noted that in the light of the worsening social, economic, political, security and cultural conditions in the region, it is crucial to engage in joint and serious youth-focused initiatives using a human rights approach, and taking into account their actual needs, aspirations and visions for development.

21. Ms. Karima emphasized that the goal of the EGM is not only to review the draft report, but also to strengthen existing partnerships as related to youth development and explore ways of working together to implement some of the recommendations, including building the capacity of youth and youth organizations in Arab countries and activating their role in society. Ms. Karima also saw this event as an opportunity to inspect some promising practices in some countries that have contributed to the consolidation of a culture of participation at the family, school and community levels. She emphasized the importance of actively listening to youth as an essential source of understanding for the reality of millions of young men and women, hoping that this project, albeit modest and short-term, will contribute to the consolidation of the participatory approach and building youth confidence and trust in governments by promoting solid bridges of interaction, dialogue and joint actions.

22. Ms. Aline Germani, Director of the Center for Public Health Practice at the Faculty of Health Sciences in the American University of Beirut, noted that the draft report is based on a desk review of various articles, studies and documents published in the twenty-two Arab countries, and which tackle youth participation in the decision-making process, in youth programming initiatives, as well as youth engagement in scouts and other NGOs and community-based organizations. She added that in addition to the desk review, ESCWA chose to conduct a qualitative research on the opinion of youth with regards to their understanding of participation as well as the extent and impact of their participation. The main challenges cited by Ms. Germani in the formulation of the report were the scarcity of documentation and absence of evaluation reports of youth policies and plans in all Arab countries. As a result, she clarified that the research question about the impact of youth participation could not be answered. In Tunisia and Jordan, however, the qualitative study enriched the report as it helped reflect the perceptions of youth on the effect of their participation. Ms. Aline concluded by highlighting the engagement of youth research assistants in the formulation of the report and in managing its proceedings, with ESCWA welcoming this approach.

23. The opening session was followed by panel discussions on the content of the draft report, the case studies, the regional analysis and the future potential formulation of capacity-building material on enhanced youth participation in decision-making, with contributions from experts, government representatives and civil society actors from Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon and Tunisia.

Annex

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